

# **Cinedesign: a research method applied to audiovisual typography and graphic design in motion pictures**

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## **Abstract**

*An introduction to the research method as applied to the doctoral dissertation Cinedesign: typography and graphic design in motion pictures – The AMPAS awards for best film – 1927 to 2004, considering functional aesthetics of design and visual communications.*

**Key-words:** *Audiovisual graphic design, methodology, movie titles.*

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## **1. Audiovisual design**

The advent of the computer as a work tool in contemporary culture implied a radical transformation in the means of production, promoting new communication and entertainment forms in which graphic design is thoroughly inserted. The current notion that we live in a civilization of images, in which reading is relegated to a secondary level, does not really translate the true importance and significance that reading has in our contemporary life. A new form of orality, of an audiovisual nature, is present in the most important media, therefore demanding a literary and visual education. More than ever, in times of intense traffic of information, we are still a civilization based on reading and writing; speaking and writing are at the heart of the informational structure (Barthes, 1985. pp 190 –205).

The more refined, complex and diversified word-images relationships are, the more knowledge and skills to deal with new forms of creation and production in graphic and typographic design are required. In television, an important contemporary graphic design field, the use of kinetic and expressive typography is constantly seen in commercials, television show openings and credits, thus enhancing metaphorical qualities of the moving word. The growth of the persuasive function of graphic design, as a result of the interaction of semantic and aesthetical qualities, coincides with the advent of the art and technologies of photography, cinema, television, telephony and later, with computers. The dynamics of the persuasive function with the informative character of typography promoted changes in the functions played by the written word, which led to modifications in letterforms, typographic design and language itself.

The dialectical match between tradition and innovation promotes visual communication games that define the way messages are conveyed, while at the same time, characterizes the era in which we live, an age of communication games. Starting in the 19th century and throughout the 20th century, with the inception and implementation of the technologies of photography, motion pictures and television, new graphic and typographic design fields were created, generating new trade implications and opening new institutional, political and experimental possibilities. The computerization of households, industrial plants and offices in the 1980s, as a result of new informational and digital technologies, has promoted a huge cultural impact which, in its diversified manifestations, greatly affected graphic design as a whole. We have to be well prepared to face the fierce competition that has resulted from the dissemination of information and educational specialization. At the same time, new technologies promote communication processes that spur inventions, resulting in elaborated audiovisual languages. A cultural revolution is underway now; a digital revolution requiring well formed and informed graphic design professionals who know how to deal with words, images, sound and animation.

## **2. Research Objectives**

### **2.1. Statement of the Problem**

We have seen in recent years radical changes in the ways we use and read written words, i.e., the processes of producing and designing type and text for use on television, computers, and other electronic display equipment. In order to better understand the uses of the written

word today, and to verify the possible changes that may have occurred in the design of letterforms and typographic design, a systematic study based on functional aesthetics of letterforms in motion pictures must be undertaken, as they constitute the origin of the moving text. Cinema is the original and pioneering audiovisual activity and historically is the first experimental space for typography and design in this kind of media.

Cinedesign is a proposed study on the manifestations of typography and graphic design in motion pictures, searching for the changes and patterns occurred throughout the development of cinema. In order to make this research tangible, a specific group of movies was chosen, keeping in mind the universality factor defining this research, that is, those awarded the Oscar for Best Pictures by the AMPAS - Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences. This is the most neutral movie category, which is the result of the votes of all academy members and embed a diversity of qualities that make the category movies favourite.

## 2.2. Relevance of the Study

Movie titles represent the beginning of a new language presently being explored in television, video, computers, and many other electronic devices. The design of movie titles is an important visual communications activity that has been neglected in most graphic design surveys and historical accounts. It is in this contemporary context that I propose to study the development of the design of text and letterforms in motion pictures as an attempt to discover the changes occurred and establish the possible patterns it developed as an art and as a medium, searching for a taxonomy of forms, movements and languages, while considering related social, aesthetic and technological aspects. Cinedesign, a term coined for this study, is an original way of approaching the motion pictures along time. By placing typography and graphic design in the spotlight, I hope it will change the way the reader will look at movies after reading this dissertation.

Movie titles are very much appreciated by film fans, a cultural inheritance that has been neglected in most graphic design surveys, film festivals and historical accounts. Besides, audiovisual design is a booming activity that has been offering many work opportunities, a market that requires intelligent, sensible, and skilful professionals. Preparing these professionals to the work market asks for well-informed professors, teachers and instructors, and well equipped schools and training rooms.

Movies, television and computers are an active part of our everyday life today, but while contemporary graphic design became also an audiovisual activity, most of graphic design education has not updated its curricula to match the new requirements of sound and movement. Graphic Design schools in general have scarcely adapted their programs to the audiovisual requirements of professional pertinence. Our tradition, shaped by the influences of Bauhaus, with workshops and laboratories, does not include teaching and research of kinetic and audiovisual design. Preliminary research confirmed the virtual absence of literature on this subject, except for a chapter in the book *Film and TV graphics* (Herdeg, 1967), which examined some contemporary movie titles. Yet specialized periodicals and literature on the theme are scarce, thus the purpose of this study is to provide a better

understanding of the activity. During the time between proposition of this study and the publication of the dissertation where this article is inserted – about 11 years –, two important books on the theme were published and some attention has been given to it by the media and specialized periodicals, but still it is a study field with great potential for growth.

I propose to analyze typography and graphic design in movies, searching in its discourse for the formal, functional, semantic, and narrative elements that constitute its practice, art and language. Much more than teaching a student to manipulate certain pieces of software suitable to audiovisual design, the function of a designer-professor is to penetrate the universe of sound, image and animation with the aim of discovering the kinetic qualities of graphic design, that is, the moving image, sound, narrative and storytelling with congenial attributes, thus establishing a stable connection between form and contents.

### 2.3. Research Plan

This study is not intended to propose a universal history of movie titles, which requires judgments that entail selections based on certain criteria and in some idiosyncrasy as well. The objective is to promote a mapping of typographic design as applied to motion pictures in terms of a visual language and a surrogate of graphic design in a given space and time, in other words, a diachronic research which is concentrated in the praxis of graphic design, where history is the context in which it occurs. Although it is not the facts or personalities I look for in this research, they may appear in some interpretations as a contextual reference, or, in the cases where they are an outstanding example for a better understanding of the graphic design and the messages they convey. In this sense, it is impossible not to mention Saul Bass, who was the pioneer of congenial movie titles, and whose titles became themselves an art form. I am more interested in the ways the narrative structures and the delivery of information have changed throughout time, and in how graphic language has evolved.

### 2.4. Portraits of an Epoch

With the aim of promoting spontaneity in choosing the movies, the Oscar's Best Picture category was chosen since it best reflects the objective of neutrality – or impartiality – in the selection, for we are dealing with mass production, a category that most democratically represents this research's first intentions. The point here is that it is not a selection of the world's best titles and credits – a very elusive approach –, but a study of a group of movies that were, in the most cinematic terms, the best movies in their years. Besides, there is a close relationship among the film producer, the film director and the graphic designer.

Thus, from 1927 to 2004, seventy-seven movies were awarded the Best Picture prize. They help us to interpret and criticize design in the movies, a considerably tough task to accomplish, considering the virtual diversities of typographic and graphic design manifestations in the movies. Furthermore, for comparison purposes, other pictures nominated for the Best Picture category are studied as references; also included are movies cited as landmarks of the history of cinema, as indicated in this study's reference literature, the book *How to read a film*, by James Monaco.

As the designer's work in the movies was relegated to a merely technical level, the great majority of graphic design in motion pictures has yet no cinematographic credits and it was only after the seventies that they started to appear more regularly on the screen. When considering the design in Best Picture movies, independently of good or bad graphics or animation, the study becomes a natural portrait of the periods, or phases, which made up the history of movie titles and graphics, while establishing other criteria for qualitative judgment.

A diachronic study, as the interpreter of the concealed truths enclosed in every frame or film sequence, shall transcend the possible acclamation of graphic design's great heroes and unveil the spirit of the anonymous generations that shaped kinetic design and typography, thus defining the activity of cinedesign.

### **3. The Method**

Graphic design is a specific manifestation of visual communications, where visual arts merge with communication, and where formal aspects interact with semantics and functionalism. Although a great deal of importance is given to the functional qualities of graphic design, it is the aesthetical aspects that usually make a difference and establish the charming values of beauty.

Design is an intermediary activity; it has no purpose in itself. In this sense design has an indelible utilitarian character in the process of connecting the making of objects and the modes in which they are used. Fitness for purpose, the functional qualities of commodities and visual messages, are at the heart of the design process and are part of a theoretical ground that can be traced back to classical Greece and Rome. The beauty of a design product is thus associated to the efficiency of its performance.

On the one hand, the design of a certain product, object, or visual piece may be developed according to the structural aesthetics and functional aspects concerning the product and the public, and where beauty and efficiency come as one. On the other hand, it can also be approached as a plastic activity in which shape, color, and materials are used in the production of objects, either as a three dimensional piece or a flat image.

Studying motion pictures– the pioneer advent of animated and audiovisual typography – means analyzing the origins of typographic audiovisual language. The diachronic approach and the study of pertinent facts have undoubtedly had a positive influence on academic and professional activities and were supplemented by aesthetic inquiry, where the aesthetics of design has its own nature. Design is an intermediary activity, thus functional matters and considerations are at its very foundations. The aesthetics of design is defined by the dialectics of form and function.

#### **3.1. Research Questions**

An aesthetic inquiry based on graphic and typographic design on screen shall focus on graphic design in the movies, as it represents the origins of audiovisual design. Besides promoting diverse and creative graphic and typographic demonstrations, graphic design in motion pictures seems to be a legitimate tool for better understanding the audiovisual design

process. Thus, the interaction of function and form emerges and raises questions that must be answered.

1. What are the manifestations of graphic design in the movies?
2. What are the elements that constitute cinedesign and in what ways do they come close to or depart from each other?
3. Is it possible to detect probable patterns that characterize time periods, ethnical-cultural groups or gender categories?
4. How to define a taxonomy of graphic design or titles in the movies?
5. What are the formats of graphic presentations and what are their elements of visual communication?

To answer these questions, the research layout must be set.

#### **4. Related Literature**

After preliminary research indicated the scarcity of specialized publications, and after much thought given to the topic “typography in the cinema”, and also considering the nature of audiovisual design, it is possible to determine that there are three fundamental fields of knowledge simultaneously acting on the design of movie titles.

- Aesthetics, contemplating the visual art side of cinedesign, always bearing in mind that design aesthetics is based on the dialectics of form and function.
- Semantics, in which two different approaches try to explain the signification processes of discourse.
- Audiovisualities, or the cinematic aspects of graphic design. In the case of typography, greater emphasis is placed on graphic attributes than on narrative qualities.

In the search for knowledge and truth, I would like to pay reverence to the writings of Plato, which were an important discovery in terms of philosophical readings, given the dynamics of the interrogative process and the much thought given to the growing writing technology in classical Greece.

In Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical investigations*, the idea of language-games pervading the text, i.e., that the unpredictable unfolding of language in action characterizes our social interactions, in which we create our things and theories, is an adequate – although challenging - theoretical ground for this study. Wittgenstein's ideas on the general form of propositions and language (nº 65-66, p. 31) and, by extension, culture, which corresponds to the notion we have about games, which we may understand but not define, established by criss-crossing and overlapping relationships.

According to Wittgenstein, a good example of these relationships is that of family resemblances. Social games and the arts are organic, complex, and intertwined networks, in which the use of language, and thus of information and communication, equals the articulation of the agonistics of power. Wittgenstein's book rescues art and the sciences from the constraints of the ideal truth concealed in the searched closed form, and puts them together on the same open platform along the network of knowledge and in its social implications.

*The post-modern condition*, by Jean François Lyotard, is a reflection on the social aspects of the acquisition of knowledge and the struggle for power, in which the author considers information as a commodity (pp. 4-5, 45). His work reflects a crisis of legitimacy (Jameson, p. vii) and the loss of the grand narratives of truth and stable systems so dear to the sciences, casting a contemporary light on the network of relationships foreseen by Wittgenstein. The book tries to explain, or to understand, the conditions of knowledge in which visual communication plays an important part, and where the arts and the sciences acquire similar status, even sharing the same uncertainties, or at least acknowledging their limitations, their possibilities, and their particularities.

The post-modern condition is an attempt to elucidate contemporary life through its panoramic view of the intricacies of social relations at many different levels – general and particular – with emphasis on relating the economic and political domains to the motions of knowledge. Lyotard touches on many aspects of contemporary life, mentioning that scientific knowledge is a kind of discourse, that knowledge is a commodity, and that the knowledge gap between developed and developing countries is even bigger than before, while the ownership and use of knowledge on the international market is highly disputed by those who produce this commodity. We can no longer pose the problem of communication within the framework of information theory, which is the stable position of a ruling technocracy. Today, both context and the agonistics aspects of society make a great difference (pp 14-16).

## **5. Methodology**

This project requires a two-stage research methodology. In the first stage, the selected movies must be observed according to the phenomenological method in order to attain the relevant features of the object considered. The design criticism should be achieved by the confrontation of the observations about the immanent character, or intrinsic form, of the movie titles and credits, with those on the possible relationships later established in the context they were created. The phenomenological approach of Edmund Husserl, as applied to academic research by Eugene F. Kaelin and David Ecker (1972), is appropriate for this study because it allows a systematization of art criticism without constraining the subjectivities inherent in the acts of seeing and communicating. These acts are the meeting places in which the real and whole aesthetic experiences take place. In terms of the field of visual communications, the aesthetic experience takes place in two forms: as visual art and as language. To avoid incorporating personal and idiosyncratic value judgments in art and design criticism, a common ground must be established. The functional aesthetics inquiry should be based on the art work's immanent qualities, in which good is related to both visual art and communication. Since this study examines both past and present films, the establishment of an aesthetic inquiry is completed with historical research, which makes it possible to locate the object in time and space.

### 5.1. "Reading a Film": The Observation Method

The listed movies were read, in the sense established by James Monaco in *How to read a film*, and from a phenomenological point of view, analyzed and interpreted, initially from Hi8

and VHS tapes, and subsequently from DVDs, described and archived as documents and mnemonic devices. From the movies considered, video clips were selected, including production credits and all pertinent graphic design images whenever they appeared in the movie sequence. In order to better organize this process, a cataloguing form was developed, expressing the two conceptual parts of the observation process, defined by apprehension and description of each movie individually.

First of all, using the phenomenological method, an eidetic description of the study object is realized in two stages, or the so called *epochés*, as determined by the methodological fundamentals. The first *epoché*, known as Time 1 (T1), just after the observation of the object or event themselves, or phenomenon, is an objective description – both formal and impressionistic – that aims to eliminate all previous knowledge about the object and other historical references, avoiding judgments of value. It is a descriptive process that transcends formal description, while searching for the embedded truths concealed in type, images and sounds.

The second *epoché*, Time 2 (T2), is a re-reading conducted so as to delete – or modify – previous historical comments plus those demonstrating previous knowledge about the object, in an attempt to extract the purest description and facilitate full understanding of the phenomenon.

Finally, after completing the apprehension method, a formal and technical description is made for each movie, documenting all relevant credits, while a selective cut with the most representative images from the movie's sequences and graphics, reveals the typography and graphic design in the motion picture. From each video clip a group of still images was digitalized and saved on several media along time, from floppy disks to DVD. There is a large and growing catalogue of relevant images in terms of typography and graphic design in the motion pictures. The second stage is the reflective thinking on the collected, read and sorted audiovisual material, reviewed according to the three fields of influence, as an art/design form, a communication process and cinematic expression.

With this study I intend to shed some light on the understanding of audiovisual design, as a true design praxis and educational matter, trying to describe and classify its categories, or modalities, a kind of taxonomy of audiovisual design, thus defining spatial-temporal graphic manifestations, narrative structures and establishing relationships under the light of facts guided by the functional aesthetics of typography and graphic design.

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